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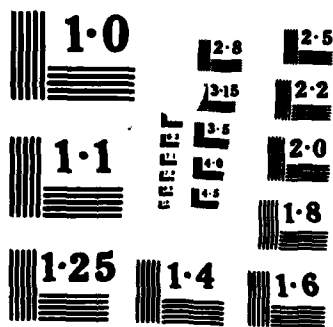
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Brian Michael Jenkins

December 1983

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TERRORISM: BETWEEN PRUDENCE AND PARANOIA*

The atmosphere in this country right now is a lot like the atmosphere that prevailed in West Germany six years ago. At that time, the assassination of a prominent banker, the attempted kidnapping and killing of a federal prosecutor, the kidnapping and murder 42 days later of a major industrialist by German terrorists, and the hijacking of a Lufthansa airliner by Palestinian terrorists had created an atmosphere of fear and alarm. Sandbags were piled in front of government buildings. Machinegun-toting guards seemed everywhere. Armored cars were parked at airports. Terrorists had threatened to shoot down a Lufthansa airliner with ground-to-air missiles in retaliation for the armed rescue of hostages aboard a hijacked German airliner at Mogadishu. Lufthansa airliners adopted zig-zag landing patterns.

The difference between the United States in December 1983 and Germany in October 1977 is that we have terrorism without terrorists.

How many Shi'ites there are on the East Coast, how many potential suicide drivers with truck bombs there are in Washington may be irrelevant. In an atmosphere of fear and alarm, extraordinary security precautions are being taken as a matter of prudence.

That is what terrorism is really all about. Lacking conventional power, extremists use terrorist tactics to create an atmosphere of fear and alarm. In this atmosphere, people will exaggerate the strength of the terrorists and the importance of their cause, giving the terrorists the power to compel governments to behave in certain ways to avoid further attacks or divert vast resources to protect themselves. Terrorism is aimed at the people who are watching. The specific target, the victim or victims, may be secondary, even irrelevant to the terrorists, so long as they achieve the psychological effects they desire.

It often works. In the current case, a campaign of terrorism directed against American targets in the Middle East, combined with an unrelated bomb at the Capitol and the threats that are inevitably received in the wake of major terrorist incidents, have created an

*An abridged version of this paper appeared in the Los Angeles Times, December 18, 1983.

atmosphere of fear in Washington. The highly visible security measures taken in response to these threats, ironically, intensify the fear.

Physical protection against terrorism poses a number of problems: Terrorist groups are hard to penetrate, hard to predict. Knowing what they might do is mainly a matter of human intelligence. There is always a high noise level of threats, few of which materialize, few of which can be ignored.

Security works and at the same time it doesn't work. Security may protect one kind of target against one kind of attack, but terrorists are resourceful. They will alter their tactics or shift their sights to other unprotected targets.

There is a basic asymmetry. Terrorists can attack anything, anywhere, anytime. Governments cannot protect everything, everywhere, all the time.

Physical protection against every conceivable kind of terrorist attack can become enormously costly in manpower and money. The costs are determined not by the strength of the opponent but by the number of targets to be protected against even a comparatively weak opponent who can strike anywhere.

How much security is enough? In dealing with terrorism, as in dealing with nuclear war, this question is not easily answered in objective terms. How much is enough depends on a level of fear, a subjective measure. If terrorists had a more limited range of targets, and attacked more often, we could more easily assess the effectiveness of various security measures. As it is, we remain uncertain whether the absence of an attack is due to security or to the fact that terrorists never intended such an attack in the first place.

Americans do not stoically accept losses from terrorism as we accept the thousands of lives lost in automobile accidents. In the wake of a terrorist attack we demand action. If we cannot identify and take action against the terrorists, then we transfer culpability to those charged with security and demand an accounting from them. In the wake of car bombings in Beirut and probably hundreds of subsequent threats, would any of us--if charged with the security of the White House--not argue for blocking the entrances to protect the President and to protect ourselves? If this measure were not taken, and if an incident were

subsequently to occur, we would view the security men as personally negligent.

Each measure to protect the Capitol, the White House, or any other building in Washington is taken in response to a specific incident or threat, dictated by prudence. Context is extremely important. In an atmosphere of alarm, people understandably become more prudent.

A continuing obsession with terrorist threats and physical security makes us feel less secure. Our diplomats abroad and our officials at home are seen to live under constant threat. The evening news brings the carnage into our homes. We participate as vicarious victims. We share the fear.

Extraordinary security measures fulfill the wildest fantasies of the terrorists. They want the mighty to tremble. They may view the government, or want to view the government they oppose, as a fearful tyrant, living behind bayonets, frightened of the people it claims to rule. (Terrorists have difficulty distinguishing between reality and what they want to see.) Concrete barricades reinforce this delusion.

We come to see government the same way. It seems unable to effectively combat terrorism because it cannot find the terrorists, because it cannot protect everything, because the normal deterrents don't seem to work against terrorists. This is not entirely correct: Most terrorists ultimately are killed or apprehended. Only a few are suicidal. Physical security deters some, if not all, attacks. But governments always seem to operate at a disadvantage, especially in the short run. Terrorists create dramas in which they and their victims are the central figures. Except for the occasional rescue of hostages, governments seldom get to play the role of heroes. More often, the government is seen as reactive, incompetent, impotent, Intelligence has failed. Security has been demonstrably breached. The government cannot satisfy the public's appetite for action.

We see our government now as beleaguered. One cannot help but recall that the current administration turned its first page with some of the strongest rhetoric against terrorism heard in this country, promising "swift and effective retribution." The level of international terrorism has since increased. And the President now lives behind newly installed concrete barricades. The rhetoric was that of an astute

politician accurately reflecting the residual anger of an American public still spitting mad at the end of the Iranian hostage episode, and the current security measures are prudent precautions in the wake of recent terrorist attacks and threats--but on psychological points, who is ahead?

Extraordinary security measures are a highly visible demonstration of the potency of terrorists. This is fact. The widespread availability of weapons and explosives, the many vulnerabilities that can be successfully attacked by those willing to attack anything, and the demonstrated utility of terrorist tactics have allowed power--defined here as the capacity to advertise, alarm, coerce, disrupt, or destroy--to descend to smaller and smaller groups. To put it another way, fanatics and irreconcilables who have existed throughout the history of mankind have become an increasingly potent force to be reckoned with. Concrete barriers around the White House provide repugnant proof of this power.

Does it work both ways? What effect do the physical security measures have on our political leaders? Do they induce a Fort Apache mentality? What happens to political leaders--in the White House, on Capitol Hill, or campaigning for office--who are constantly reminded that to step beyond a heavily protected perimeter is to risk their lives? Do they become frightened? Of us--because they don't know who among us might be a terrorist? How might that dreadful thought affect their political decisions? Might they recklessly plunge into crowds, needlessly exposing themselves to any crackpot with a pistol, to demonstrate their courage or that they refuse to become prisoners of their own security?

Security measures visibly separate the government from the people. For some politicians, this is an intolerable condition. Lyndon Johnson succeeded to the presidency as a result of an assassination. Obviously, presidential security was tight. But Johnson was a professional politician who had campaigned in rural towns before radios became important. He was also an extremely physical man who seemed to draw strength from physical contact. He locked forearms with his left hand while shaking hands with his right. He slapped backs. He hugged. He literally picked people up off the ground. He loved to work crowds. It was a clawing, shoving, sweating affirmation of his own power.

President Reagan draws upon his skills as a professional actor to communicate via the electronic media more effectively than any other American president. More accustomed to cameras than crowds, he may not immediately feel a burning need to press the flesh. Anyway, television has rendered that the least effective way of reaching the public. We must also recall that President Reagan was seriously wounded by an assassin's bullet. Commenting on the new security measures, the President recently said, "I tried it the other way once outside the Hilton Hotel. I didn't like it." But President Reagan is also a politician, and 1984 is an election year. He is not going to campaign from behind dump trucks and snow plows.

This year will probably go down as the bloodiest year in the history of contemporary terrorism; several thousand people will die in terrorist incidents worldwide. Although each death is shocking and tragic, measured against the world volume of violence, the terrorist contribution is minuscule. Twenty thousand are murdered every year in the United States. And 60 million people--soldiers and civilians--died in the two world wars in the first half of this century. In terms of body count, we live in comparatively peaceful times.

Obviously, we must take precautions, not only against terrorist attacks, but also against psychological effects of terrorism--and of the measures we take in the name of security. The problem is that there is no line between prudence and paranoia; if we let ourselves go, we could work ourselves up into a frenzy of fear that not even the terrorists could improve on.

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